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May 19, 1961

PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO DE GAULLE

Paris, May 31 - June 2, 1961

Background Paper

FRENCH VIEWS ON PROBLEM OF BERLIN AND GERMANY

(NOTE: This paper is essentially an updating and condensation of two papers prepared in DMR on this subject on April 7, 1959 and March 8, 1960.)

Summary

The French Government is satisfied with the existing situation in Berlin and Germany and would like it to continue unchanged. Thus the French are the least inclined of the Four Powers to make any concession over Berlin which might lead to disarmament, thinning out of forces, disengagement, confederation, or German reunification, particularly if this involves any loss of security for the West.

The French oppose anything they think could result in the loss of Berlin or in the serious erosion of the Western position there. This does not mean that they would reject any and all adjustments in the status quo. They would probably offer no determined opposition to mutual concessions that did not involve, in fact or appearance, a serious erosion of the Western position. However, the French Government would regard any steps tending to endanger Western rights and presence in Berlin not only as threatening future Allied-West German relationships, but also as portending the possibility of a new Russo-German rapprochement.

The French position is, in fact, that of one man--President de Gaulle. Because the basic French position is characterized by firmness, insistence on maintenance of present legal rights, and aversion to concessions, it assumes considerable importance as a brake upon the more "flexible" attitudes which appear to exist in the UK position and to some degree occasionally in the German attitude. The degree to which the French will be able to maintain this firmness, much as they might wish to, is, of course, dependent upon the action taken by the US in maintaining a resolute opposition to "yielding" on Berlin. Any indication that the US was not firmly opposed to such a "yielding" would undoubtedly produce a real "agonizing reappraisal" on the part of the French.

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By SKF, NARA, Date 4/81

The Quai d'Orsay working level has recently shown some apprehension over the possibility that Khrushchev might be too exhilarated over Laos, Cuba, and Yuriy Gagarin to make a proper calculation of Western intentions concerning Berlin.

French officials appear to be fairly complacent concerning Khrushchev's threat to conclude a "separate peace treaty" with the "GDR", although from time to time the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister have expressed some alarm about the prospects of a blowup. Being in favor of maintaining a firm position on Berlin, French officials tend to minimize any possible adverse consequences of taking such a firm line.

French Government Position

Throughout the current Berlin crisis, beginning in November 1958, the French official position has been firm. They have been extremely reluctant to initiate any negotiating positions which might be taken by the West. The French position is one of "stand-pat" and not showing one's cards. The French approach is undoubtedly based on their interest in preserving as much as possible of the status quo. The French are most reluctant to assist in steps which might lead to a general European settlement adversely altering the relative power status between France and Germany or weakening the security of Western Europe.

Several factors need to be taken into account in explaining the French position. Unlike the West German and the British Governments, the French Government is not faced with a vigorous and effective opposition party. This enables the French Government to reveal as little of its position at any particular time as it sees fit with no need to parry the critical curiosity of the opposition party. It also means that the position taken need not represent an internal compromise—there is no need to accommodate the position to opposition demands. The result might well be an even more stubborn, rigid attitude. A further factor related to this is the dominating personality of General de Gaulle. French policy is likely to be de Gaulle policy no matter what other views may be held at Foreign Office working levels. De Gaulle may, as in the past, fail to coordinate his policy in any very thorough manner with his Western allies, but, nonetheless, the end result is likely to be a position in favor of a firm Western stand, including the will to force access. De Gaulle's policy is less likely than that of any Western power to encompass any disengagement or thinning-out-of-forces compromise schemes.

French Views on Reunification, Disengagement, and Disarmament

The reasons are obvious. France does not want the balance of power in Western Europe altered so as to increase the

strength of Germany. Nor does it wish to see West Germany cut loose from its Western military and economic ties. Quite apart from Germany, per se, reunification on terms acceptable to the Soviets would alter the entire military balance in Europe to the almost certain detriment of the West, and this is an added reason for French aversion to reunification.

The French are very leary of disengagement, and under the firm hand of General de Gaulle, whose thinking on this problem is premised on military, rather than political, considerations, there is likely to be great reluctance on the part of the French Government to agree to any disengagement plan. Any partial disarmament as a possible concomitant of a Berlin settlement is equally unappealing to the French. Both disengagement and partial disarmament in the French view are likely to lead to a situation in which France is impotent and isolated in the face of a Soviet military threat. General de Gaulle has stated categorically that disengagement has no value for the French, and that disarmament would only make sense in terms of a zone extending to the Urals.

Berlin--Access and Rights

France, like the other Western allies, wants to maintain access to Berlin and the freedom of West Berlin. This has to do with prestige and with the fear that loss of Berlin (or weakening of the Allied position in Berlin) would inevitably result in a weakened West.

It is hardly surprising that the French have a rigid position--a legalistic approach--toward the Berlin crisis. They want to maintain the European status quo--including that of Berlin--not at the price of Berlin. They accordingly take a "tough" line, and de Gaulle is known to advocate maintaining access by every means possible, not excluding force. He tempers this by saying that the West should not be provocative or use force first. French Foreign Minister Couve de Murville has also stated categorically that the West cannot brook interference with air or land communications with Berlin. He considers it essential that the Western allies retain the rights which they acquired by the German surrender, including freedom of communication with Berlin.

Foreign Office Views on Berlin

Although there is no French opposition attitude on Berlin, there has been some indication that there have been some divergent views within the Foreign Office upon various aspects of handling the crisis. For some weeks following the Khrushchev ultimatum of November 1958, the Foreign Office took no official position on the crisis.

The French Foreign

Minister indicated at an early stage that he was inclined to feel that continued Western insistence on the "nonexistence" of the East German government might be unrealistic. In early December, Couve was reported as tentatively proposing negotiations on the whole German question. And the French Ambassador in Moscow has recently expressed views partly inconsistent with de Gaulle's.

Regardless, however, of any apparent divergent opinions, the Foreign Office is certain to follow the line set by de Gaulle, and part of the "rigidity" of the French position may stem from the fact that the Foreign Office must wait to receive its cue before presenting its position.

French Views on Other Western Positions on Berlin

Because the French attitude on Berlin has been very "firm", the French have been most sensitive to weakness on the part of their allies,



Conclusions

There are undoubtedly large segments of the French population, particularly the Communists, which are opposed to the firm policy of the French Government on Berlin. However, in view of the existing political situation in France, it seems unlikely that dissident groups have had, or are likely to have, any significant influence upon decisions taken by the de Gaulle Government on Berlin and Germany. While fear of war as a consequence of the Berlin situation certainly exists in France as in the rest of Western Europe, the absence of an effective opposition to exploit this aspect has meant that the Government has not had to cater to the public's fear.

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In sum, the French throughout the Berlin crisis, both because of the present political situation within France and the foreign policy aims of the French Government, have taken a very firm stand. They will make every effort to maintain the status quo in Berlin with freedom of access for the Western allies. They will balk at any step which may be taken to solve the Berlin crisis if it seems likely to have an adverse effect upon France's military security. For various reasons--e.g., the existence of a strong government, lack of opposition, France's geographic position on the Continent, concern regarding Germany's future vis-a-vis France--France has responded to the Berlin crisis in a manner that seems to take into account to a far lesser degree the actual dangers and implications of war than has been the case in the UK or even the Federal Republic. While General de Gaulle's actions and pronouncements are often unexpected as to timing and content, there seems no reason to think that France's policy on Berlin will become any less firm. The French are unlikely to cause the US any major difficulties in any aspect other than procedural matters, provided the US position, itself, remains firm. France's own firm policy, as de Gaulle himself has said, is predicated on American power and leadership.

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